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THE TRUE SPIRIT OF CLASSICAL CULTURE¹

Χρυσίον δὲ καὶ ἀργύριον εἰπεῖν αὐτοῖς ὅτι θεῶν παρὰ θεῶν ἀεὶ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ἔχουσιν
— PLATO: Republic 416.

I.

HOWEVER highly or lightly we may chance to esteem classical culture, this much at least must be conceded, that it has been an important force in educational history thus far. In passing judgment upon its nature and value, we should therefore adhere rigorously to the rule we apply to intellectual forces generally, namely, that they are to be judged not by their abuses and perversions, nor by what they have failed to achieve because of imperfect comprehension or imperfect performance on the part of those who represent them, but first of all according to their genuine inner tendencies. Otherwise we shall be forced to condemn in some degree almost every intellectual and moral force that has appeared in human history because of some defect in its application. For nothing exhibits itself practically in its full theoretical measure, and there is a sense in which this hackneyed and universal truth finds expression even in such a theatrically worded dictum as that of Rousseau:² "Everything comes good from the hands of the Creator; everything degenerates in the hands of man." We must, then, take intellectual forces as we find them in operation, and discover whether their imperfections are inherent or extraneous, before we can pass any just judgment upon them.

All this is so obvious and dangerously near to commonplace, that its repetition would be unnecessary, were it not for the fact that so elementary a rule of sound thinking has not been sufficiently adhered to in discussions about the classics. Arguments are freely made to the effect that classical culture is

¹ Address before the Classical Conference at Ann Arbor, April 1, 1898. See p. 479.

² *Emile*, opening sentence.

antiquated and ineffectual, that at its best it is merely one of several forms of literary culture, perhaps theoretically better than any of the others, but not practically so, either because of inferior teaching or because it is intrinsically less valuable for our modern life. The attack on the practical results comes to this: Even if classical culture is what its advocates believe, nevertheless they do not succeed in exhibiting attractively its true spirit, and this justifies the suspicion that classical culture, after all, may not be so excellent as they suppose. The end of such reasoning, so far as based on inferiority of teaching, is inevitable. It drives us to the conclusion that inferior teaching proves a study inferior, if not worthless. Herbert Spencer falls into this line of thought in his well-known contrast between the study of languages and science. He asserts that since "in the acquisition of languages *as ordinarily carried on*, these natural relations between words and their meanings are not habitually traced nor the laws regulating them explained, it must be admitted they are commonly learned as fortuitous relations. On the other hand, the relations presented by science are causal relations, and, *when properly taught*, are understood as such."¹ Let us turn this around. Instead of contrasting "the acquisition of languages as ordinarily carried on" with science "when properly taught," we may contrast with the same propriety, or impropriety, "the acquisition of science as ordinarily carried on" with "language when properly taught." Rather let us do neither, but inquire into the real nature and value of the several studies, and rate them accordingly. If, after this is settled, we find something in the nature of one or another study that is sure or likely to prevent teaching it with advantage, all very well. The defect is then radical and incurable. However, if the defect is not in the nature of the study, but in our means and methods, then the trouble is extraneous and may be removed by increasing our means and improving our methods. But let every defect, whether inherent or extraneous, be estimated according to its kind and degree, for only after this has been done can we

¹ SPENCER: *Education*.

rationally determine whether and to what extent any study may be embodied in a working scheme of education.

II.

In answer to the criticisms, both practical and theoretical, the historical argument has been pressed into service. The great and undeniable fact that classical antiquity, particularly as revealed in the ancient writers, bears a fundamental relation to our modern life and thought, has been shown again and again. But the argument, though valid, is imperfect, if taken bare and by itself. It establishes the existence, but not necessarily the value of the relation. Of course we think well of our modern culture, and, if convinced that the classics are vitally related to it, would insist on studying them. In the same way a modern Chinaman might argue complacently for the Chinese classics, and a Turk for the older Arabic literature, as important to their modern culture.

But such arguing on our part, be it good or bad, does not touch the criticism based on the too frequent inadequacy of our teaching. No matter how radical our obligation to the ancient world, still, if as a matter of fact a fair appreciation of this cannot be brought surely into the possession of our students by their classical training, we had better content ourselves with other languages and literatures, provided they are well taught. And to such a view who can reasonably object? But is it true that our teaching is so bad? Bad enough, if judged by absolute standards, by the ideal excellence of classical culture or even by the best achievements of classical teaching. But is it so bad, when compared with the existing teaching in other subjects? Here we must ask the privilege of saying that it is not. Let us ask especially whether it is worse than the present teaching of French and German, for these constitute the most commonly proposed substitute for the classics. Does our existing instruction in French and German ensure a sound and fine appreciation of these literatures? Let us grant that it does. But is it a better appreciation (for this is the real question) than our classical

training secures in its own sphere? Those who are most familiar with schools and colleges the country over will not say so. And if this is a practical question, let us be consistently practical. If we displace the classics, the imperative and highly practical question remains: What linguistic and literary material have we now available or obtainable that can be proved to be not merely as good, but clearly better. For something better is what is needed, if progress is the object. It will not do to say that English will serve. Suppose it is really better. Are we to study only English on the side of language? The question is what foreign languages, now better taught or likely to be better taught, are available? The answer is easy. There are none.

Again, the historical argument, taken bare and without analysis, does not meet the theoretical objections. There are three of them, all phases of one thought. It is asserted that initial historical forces, no matter how powerful at the start, like the classics in relation to modern life and literature, enter into succeeding ages in an ever weakening ratio of influence. Then there is an argument derived from this, namely, that our modern culture is gradually but certainly tending toward independence of classical and mediæval antecedents, and the additional argument that the more enlightened modern nations are themselves becoming originating centers for the culture of the future. The picture is charming because it suggests endless progress, but has the sad fault that it is all foreground and no background. Of course the one question asked about such a picture is how far it is real and how far imaginary. Can it be said with any soberness that these three theses are incontestably proved? Are all initial historical impulses of one sort? Are not some of them clearly local and transient, and are there not others that bear the aspect of universality and permanence? Is this true of moral ideas? Is it true of intellectual factors generally? Greek geometry entered early, and in whatever part or sense it reached its measure of development its art has never been matched since. The ideas of Roman law have modified modern law, and operate in it incessantly. Universities are the creation of a past age.

The best and latest historian of their origin writes: "Their organization and their traditions, their studies and their exercises affected the progress and intellectual development of Europe more powerfully, or (perhaps it should be said) more exclusively, than any schools in all likelihood will ever do again."¹ If initial forces must decrease, what rational explanation can be offered for such an outburst as the Renaissance? Is not the true explanation to be found in the theory that some initial forces are primal, original, self-renewing, and therefore enduring.

The other phases of the theoretical criticism spring from the one just noticed. If it is not true, they are not proved or provable, at least in the sense in which they are intended. Modern culture is said to be moving away from us toward its own independence and to be forming into an originating center for the culture of the future. Is it? So far as the relation of classical to modern literature and thought is causal, such an independence is illusory. We can no more safely ignore our historical antecedents than our physical environment. We may, of course, draw up a scheme of modern culture, discarding the classics. Such a scheme may give a good education, a much better education for many than one which includes the classics. But that is not the question. The question is, what is intrinsically the best education? And no education is the best which does not aim at universality, which does not acquaint the student with all the great categories, very few in number, which we must master, if we are to understand ourselves and our world in origin and progress. If our civilization is trying to break from causal antecedents of value, it is trying to develop abnormally, but it is not destroying the existence of these antecedents. It is cutting loose from what it needs to know, and to know as well as possible. This may be labeled progress, but it is progress from knowledge toward ignorance.

III.

I have said the historical argument, taken bare and unanalyzed, is valid but imperfect, because while it avails to prove

¹RASHDALL, *Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, Vol. I, p. 5.

the fact that classical culture bears a radical relation to modern culture, it does not necessarily prove the value of the relation. And this is the vital question in the whole discussion. If the relation is not substantially valuable, we are wasting time in teaching Greek and Latin. We can meet criticism on our ways of teaching, by showing we are not worse off than others and by improving our methods. We can meet the criticism that we are opposing the natural evolution of modern learning by showing that evolution does not mean the destruction of primal rational impulses, but that the progressive unfolding of these is what gives continuous value to human history. But such arguing, though it suggests, does not prove that what we have is worth having. The classics may be an old and persistent force. Yet, for all we have shown, they may be one of the less valuable or even hindering forces, a drag on our progress, and hence a force to be antagonized and resisted. I know it seems absurd to us, who love and believe in the classics, that we should be asked to prove their value. That value has proved itself, like a tried friendship, in the intimacies of our best life. Is our confidence a delusion? We cannot be brought to think so. Is our confidence rational? So we believe, but do we really know?

Let us seek an answer by the one method which enables us to assess the value of any intellectual force. Let us subject classical culture to direct analysis and so discern its constituents. Let us find by inspection the elements which constitute the true spirit of classical culture. This is what we propose to examine, and not some caricature, perversion, or substitute. Nor is it Latin and Greek in their entirety. We are not proposing to teach this. Life is not long enough, and the whole of Greek and Latin is not worth teaching, however abundantly it will repay the advanced student to explore much that is useless even in a scheme of university instruction. We are asking for the best only. *Classicus aliquis scriptor non proletarius*, "not the rabble of writers, but the really classic," is the happy canon of Aulus Gellius, to whom we owe our earliest record of this use of the term "classic." It may well be ours.

If we could summon before our vision all the traits exhibited in the various writers, as in a vast gallery of portraits—some of them almost perfect in spite of time and some of them only partially preserved—and discarding all their differences should seek to blend in one likeness their best resemblances, how difficult and yet how simple would be the task! Difficult, because we have to put in words a charm that is felt as soon as seen. It is the charm of immediate assent to suggestions of perfection, a charm that hardly bears definition and vanishes if examined mechanically. It is the charm we feel in the presence of a masterpiece of ancient sculpture, or in the subtle art of a proof in Greek geometry. Though subtle it is simple, when once we penetrate to its meaning. Its constituents are so few, each springing from the other and each so intimately in the other, that the charm remains unbroken, not alone in its effect on us, but in its own ideal unity. It must then be with an apology we try to phrase such things. If the sensitiveness of the Greek ear for musical tones was such that they noticed and enjoyed lesser shades of modulation than we recognize, how are we to speak of the best spirit of that fine and complex ancient literature otherwise than in the rough?—rather by way of indicating where the excellence lies, than by displaying it in its own pure clearness.

To begin, then. The first trait we may notice is orderly thinking. It appears in the logical character of the languages themselves. Every word, every structural part of a word, stands for a distinct thought. "Every sentence in Greek is a problem in English" was a favorite maxim of Hadley. But he was a Greek professor. Then what of this: "The structure of every sentence is a lesson in logic" is the same thing from the lips of John Stuart Mill, who knew both Greek and logic as few have known them, and was withal a thoroughly modern man. It is not merely a grammar we study in mastering Greek and Latin sentences, but grammar in general, the logic of universal language. May I quote Mill again? After reviewing this subject and summing up the value of grammar in general, he concludes by saying: "In these qualities the classical languages have an incom-

parable superiority over every modern language, and over all languages, dead or living, which have a literature worth being generally studied.”¹ Such was the instrument of expression which the Greek, and in a lesser degree the Roman, used from childhood. Their sentences were not made as exercises in logic, but their expression was orderly because it was the natural utterance of orderly thought. Even where they fell into error, they rarely fell into confusion. We go into raptures over the creations of a long series of artists, as in the case of Gothic architecture, or the outworking of some profound scientific doctrine, built up as great masters are followed in their work by greater pupils, or admire the historical making of English poetry, wherein successive dramas and lyrics, idylls and epics combine, in Shelley’s lofty words, “as episodes to that great Poem which all poets, like the coöperating thoughts of one mind, have built up since the beginning of the world.” Alike admirable, though different, is the development of these languages, only in part recorded, — languages built up by unseen forces through many ages, undirected by consciously coöperating intention, and yet coming to orderly perfection of expression as surely as if shaped from the beginning by one mind.

Pass from language to literature. Orderly thinking is again supreme. The Greek writer takes his theme in hand. To his native habit of orderly thought, there is now superadded the conscious intention of adult reason, and, it may be, the impulsion of genius. Perhaps it is a Plato or an Aristotle. Here we are in the region of the literature of philosophy. So let us again ask a modern philosopher to say better than we can how strict their thinking was. “To question all things; never to turn away from any difficulty; to accept no doctrine, either from ourselves or from other people, without a rigid scrutiny by negative criticism, letting no fallacy or incoherence or confusion of thought slip by unperceived; above all, to insist upon having the meaning of a word clearly understood before using it, and the meaning of a proposition before assent-

¹ Inaugural address at St. Andrews.

ing to it; these are the lessons we learn from the ancient dialecticians.”¹ How endlessly might such testimony be cited from witnesses who have deeply studied the classics, and are at the same time modern men. And such preëminently can give the testimony of experts.

We must hurry on to the second trait of the best classical culture. I mean refinement. It is the natural sequel to orderly thinking. It is something very different from what is often understood by the term. It is more than delicacy of taste, which, unsupported, so easily degenerates into fastidiousness, or even effeminacy. Sydney Smith must have had in mind this spurious form of refinement, so common among dilettanti nearly a century ago, when he caustically spoke of “the elegant imbecilities of classical culture.” We are speaking of something else. It is the refinement of thought. We may be orderly thinkers and yet do no more than think in outline. This is sound and necessary, but it is not all. A man who can do no more than this does not get beyond routine. As Volkmann acutely observes: “We may be the best of logicians without on that account progressing a single step in our knowledge.”² After the main lines are clear, and we have followed out the side lines and branchings, we must still divide and subdivide, define and distinguish, until the last limit of division is reached. Otherwise we shall never know anything by exact estimation and in its inner completeness. We shall be forever thinking in the rough. If we may borrow terms from chemistry, orderly thinking is our qualitative, and refined thinking our quantitative analysis. Here comes in the subtlety of nice discrimination, of separation into least parts—all of them related and yet all seen separately in clearest definition—of exact exclusions and inclusions, with nothing dragged in and nothing left out, with no overlappings or interferences, nothing superfluous and nothing missing. Associated with this keen study of the little differences, of the “trifles which make per-

¹ MILL: Inaugural address at St. Andrews.

² *Erkenntnisstheoretische Grundzüge der Naturwissenschaften*, p. 18, Leipzig, 1896. Volkmann is the successor of the eminent Franz Neumann as professor of mathematical physics at Königsberg.

fection," there is a growing appreciation of the relevancy and real value of the various ideas we are estimating. "The difficulty of rational judgment," says Volkmann,¹ "does not lie in the difficulty of correctly judging. It lies rather in the manner and method of obtaining the truly appropriate material." This fact becomes clearer to our understanding, when we realize how refinement of thought underlies refinement of taste. When the exact truth of a geometrical proposition has been traced up to the conclusion, suddenly the whole becomes lucid, "having no part dark." Then it is the pure delight of the scholar is realized. The proof is beautiful to him, because seen to be finely and completely true. He has had a lesson in refinement of taste as produced by refinement of thought. The refined taste in its turn keeps reacting happily on refinement of thought, and gradually comes to serve as an instinctive test of the crudeness or finish, the excellence or banality of our own or other men's thoughts. By sifting out the crude and base, and receiving ideas only after testing them and refining them of their grossness, "it obtains and arranges the truly appropriate material" of thought. For lack of such refinement, many men, sharp enough logically, never get beyond logic. This blended refinement of thought and taste, moreover, adds the touch of grace and distinction to the ideas on which it works. From this point of view how sane and subtle are the words of the elder Disraeli: "To adorn ideas with elegance is an act of the mind superior to that of receiving them; but to receive them with a happy discrimination is the effect of a practiced taste."²

Can there be a great literature, or science, or art, or philosophy, unless it embodies many refinements and much refinement of thought? And if refinement of taste be added, is it not still greater? For then only does it approach perfection of form, and "in perfection¹ of form" as Mill assures us, "the preëminence of the ancients is not disputed."

¹ Erkenntnisstheoretische Grundzüge, p. 20.

² Literary Character of Men of Genius.

The third and greatest trait of the best classical culture is ideality. It is alike the inspiration of the other two and their completion. Historically speaking, they are derived from it. Analytically speaking, it is the end toward which they move. And what is this ideality, this supreme thing which animates and rules ancient literature? It is nothing less than openness of mind to ideas in their worth, relevancy and beauty, and such a trait reposes and must forever repose on no other basis than the love of truth. Is it truly in the classical literature? Who are to answer this question, except those who know best? And who can know best about any subject who has not studied and studied deeply? We appeal, then, not to those who have not, but to those who have made experimental acquaintance with the best classical literature to say whether ideality is not its very life and soul. Who has ever heard of an instance where a man of real classical culture, gained at first hand from the original sources, has given a negative answer? And why not hear the answer of the ancients themselves? "It is a sacred duty to prefer truth," is Aristotle's reply to the query whether truth is better than friendship, "for though both are friends, truth is the better friend."¹ Let us hear a lesser writer, and a writer too of the decadence. "For my part I am persuaded," says Polybius, pausing in his long History,² "that there is not in nature a greater goddess, or any that has stronger power over men than Truth. For, though all unite in opposition to her, and though falsehood draws up a whole train of probabilities and sets them in array against her, she triumphs, I know not how, and forces her way into the heart. Sometimes her power is instantly discerned. Sometimes she is obscured for a while; but appears at last in perfect splendor, and surmounts by her own force alone the falsehood under which she has been oppressed."

Such are the elements out of which the true spirit of classical culture is created. Order, refinement, ideality, these three, and the greatest is the last. Look at our modern culture. Are these things valuable? Are they not invaluable to all who

¹ Ethics I, 6, 1.

² History XIII, 5.

believe in the worth of thought and reason? Are they not valuable to all thinking, even the commonest, and indispensable to the highest? This is the great lesson of the classics, a lesson for all time in the finest of fine arts, the art of thinking, and its companion the art of expression. Do we not need this lesson today? Is it not the lesson which will charm the finer minds, and allure them to orderly, refined, ideal thinking, whether it be in science or philosophy, literature or history? The enemy of the true classical spirit is not science, as some have supposed. It is the utilitarian spirit, which is as hostile to science as to the classics. No matter what names and labels are used in discussion, let us not be deceived. The sharp conflict of the future is not coming between the pure classical and the pure scientific culture, for each of these needs the other, but between liberal culture as a whole and the forces of technical education. Not that we are in any way opposing technical education, except when it poses as a form of liberal education, which it is not, and cannot become, without ceasing to be what it now is.

A word in closing this paper. There is still one objector we must answer. It is the one who persists in saying "This is all very fine and very true, and I will acquire your wonderful culture by studying the classics in translations." He will do nothing of the sort, let him try all his life. But suppose he could. The obstinate question remains: Is this the best way to do it? Of course not. It is no more the best way to deal with Greek and Latin, than with French or German. And is not "the best way the way to take? Is this settled and steadily resolved upon? If so, then why not do away with makeshifts and substitutes, except as makeshifts and substitutes. Is it a good way to study the classics? Yes—a fine way to study translations of the classics, and a good way to study the classics at secondhand. But is this what we are proposing to study? There is something a translation will never yield and that something is what the author said as he said it. The most certain way of conveying in language the unspoiled original thought of anyone is by speaking. *Verba labris nascentia*, "words born on

the lips," though first conceived in the mind, these alone pass directly from speaker to hearer in their purity, and with all the living interpretation of voice, look and gesture. Next in closeness to the original utterance, comes repeating or reading aloud the words of another, and next after this comes silent reading. The voice of the classical author is silent. We strive to understand him, by doing the next best thing to hearing him speak. We read his words. If we are to get so far in our appreciation that we may justly imagine we are very near to hearing him, and even catch the echo of his voice, then it is his very words, the original utterance that is indispensable, and we become all the more assured as to our understanding of what the author meant, by understanding what he actually said. Last and least comes reading by translation, because it is furthest removed from the original utterance.

One other comment. Always in some degree, sometimes in a high degree, adequate translation is impossible. And the very thing that is impossible to translate is what is peculiar to the original and often constitutes its charm. This the reader of translations must always lose.

We need have no fear of the future of classical culture, except as we have cause to fear for the future of orderly, refined and ideal thought, or from our own imperfections as teachers. With the first we are deeply concerned, but no more and no less than are the men of science and philosophy. With the second we have immediate practical concern. For according to the measure in which we possess the true spirit of classical culture and inspire it in others, will our difficulties disappear and the indestructible ideas we strive to represent extend their influence, help to sustain our higher culture, and in things intellectual

"be still the leaven,
That spreading in this dull and clodded earth,
Gives it a touch ethereal — a new birth."

ANDREW F. WEST